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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at a rural community college to explore the process by which adult women who had returned to college decided whether to persist or drop out. In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 women who had been identified as exceptional in that they either persisted and graduated even though they had been initially identified as "high risk" (N=9) or voluntarily withdrew in spite of an initial identification as "low risk." One of the recurring themes in their interviews involved writing and writing assignments as part of their college experience. The institutional persisters indicated that writing assignments requiring them to explore their feelings, goals, and thoughts had a positive influence on them. These assignments gave them an opportunity to analyze their reasons for attending college and boosted their self-confidence. For the persisters, courses requiring writing assignments were also positive experiences, especially when class assignments required students to interview others, research topics, discuss self-awareness, and articulate their goals. The leavers, on the other hand, reported difficulty in writing certain types of papers and felt writing was a barrier to their continued enrollment in college. (ALB)

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PERCEPTIONS OF WRITING BY EXCEPTIONAL CASES OF ADULT RETURNING WOMEN IN A RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PERSISTERS AND LEAVERS

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- A B S T R A C T -

Perceptions of Writing by Exceptional Cases of Adult Returning Women in a Rural College: Differences between Persisters and Leavers

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To explore the processes of departure and persistence decisions with adult returning women students, indepth interviews were conducted with exceptional cases of institutional persisters and leavers in a rural community college. The women defined as exceptional "outliers" were those who persisted even though they were initially identified as "high risk" and therefore not predicted to continue, and those who left in spite of initial identification as "low risk" students predicted to persist. Most research on retention is quantitative and results in predictive models of risk are based on the most typical behavior. The outliers, or exceptions to the rule, are discounted since they do not conform to the mean. This study expanded on the understanding of departure and persistence by focusing on these outliers with the intent of obtaining a new perspective on adult women's decisions to depart or persist in college.

Analysis of the dialogue in the interviews revealed a number of themes or topics that influenced decisions to persist. One of the recurring themes revolved around writing and writing assignments. The basis of this paper is the description of findings related to these women's views of writing as a part of their initial college experience.

The institutional persisters indicated that writing assignments that asked them to explore their feelings, goals, and thoughts had a positive influence on them. These assignments gave them an outlet from which to analyze their reasons for attending college and boosted their self-confidence. Such assignments encouraged assertiveness in some and caused some of the women to think about positive role models for themselves. For the institutional persisters, courses requiring writing assignments (whether formal or informal) were positive experiences, especially when students were required to interview others, research topics, discuss self-awareness, and articulate their goals. The leavers, on the other hand, reported more difficulty in writing certain types of papers and felt writing was a barrier to their ability to continue in college. Two of the leavers did express satisfaction with journal-type writing which allowed them to express their opinions in an unstructured manner. This paper will conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for instructional and program design.

PERCEPTIONS OF WRITING BY EXCEPTIONAL CASES OF ADULT RETURNING WOMEN IN A RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PERSISTERS AND LEAVERS

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March 1989

Introduction

To explore the processes of departure and persistence decisions with adult returning women students, in-depth interviews were conducted with exceptional cases of institutional persisters and systems leavers in a rural community college. The women defined as exceptional cases were 1) those who persisted even though they were initially identified as "high risk" by the college and therefore not predicted to continue and 2) those who left in spite of initial identification as "low risk" students by the college and therefore predicted to graduate.

Research Method

The sample included seventeen adult returning women over the age of twenty-four who were enrolled in a rural open admissions community college. These women were all commuter students who attended in the Fall of 1982 or the Spring of 1983. They ranged in age from 25 to 54 and were enrolled in various college majors. Nine of the students were institutional persisters who graduated; eight of the students were systems leavers who left through voluntary withdrawal. [See Figure 1]

Exceptional cases were identified through college records and faculty and advisor recommendations based on informed judgments. A stratified random sample was then chosen. Adult women who left the college for legitimate reasons beyond their control (such as moving to follow a spouse) were excluded from the study.

1. Institutional Persisters, who were exceptional cases, persisted to graduation when by pre-enrollment characteristics of high school grades, ACT/SAT scores, minority status, and college reading placement test scores they should have had difficulty in college. Faculty and advisors also indicated that many of them had problematic home situations, financial difficulties, and experienced personal setbacks while attending college.

2. Systems Leavers, who were exceptional cases, left college when by pre-enrollment characteristics of high school grades, ACT/SAT scores, and college reading placement test scores, they should have had no difficulty in college and were predicted to have graduated. Most of the leavers demonstrated excellent to good college grade point averages before they dropped out of college. Most were married or single and had some sort of family support, according to

faculty and advisors. They had typical financial aid packages and were not advised to enroll in remedial courses.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the women according to the tenets of grounded theory in qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. They were conducted at the site of choice by the adult; about half were conducted in a quiet room at the community college and the rest were done at the place of work or in the home. A structured or focused interview guide controlled for interviewer bias. The interviews were very open-ended and the adults did the majority of the talking. The interviews were coded and then analyzed for recurring themes according to basic techniques of case study research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Implications for Research

Most research on retention is quantitative, resulting in predictive models of risk which are based on the most typical behavior. They have primarily used random samples, path analysis, and surveys of persisters and leavers to develop predictive models. These models have been based on the most frequent response or characteristic (the norm) or have been calculated on averages. Characteristics of persisters and leavers have been based on common patterns. The outliers or exceptions to the rule have been discounted since quantitative results are often measured by scores of frequency and rely on the mean or mode to derive relationships or to describe characteristics. This study expanded on the understanding of departure and persistence by focusing on these outliers with the intent of obtaining a new perspective on adult women's decisions to depart from or persist in college.

By studying institutional persisters who were "high risk" and likely to drop out, it was hoped that some of the data could reveal policies that community colleges were using which were supportive of all students, even the "high risk" students. By studying systems leavers who were "low risk" but actually withdrew from college, it was hoped that the data could reveal policies which community colleges could adopt to prevent this group of students from departing. Psychologists have often studied exceptional or "deviant" cases in order to gain insights into human behavior. Using the same premise, it was felt that looking at exceptions to the rule (in a qualitative mode) would add a richness to the current research (Brawer, 1983; Fox, 1985; Tinto, October 1985).

Results and Discussion

Over eight hundred pages of script were gathered from these in-depth interviews. Analysis of the dialogue in the interviews revealed a number of themes or topics which influenced decisions to persist or to withdraw. One of the

recurring themes, and one in which this paper addresses, revolved around writing and writing assignments. The following findings are a description of these women's views of writing as part of their college experience.

Persisters

The adult persisters often talked about writing assignments which helped them develop more self confidence and awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. Out of the eight women interviewed, six of them discussed writing assignments.

1) Self-analysis and opinion papers.

In both the Human Services I course and in the College and Self course, students were asked to write "self concept papers" where they discussed their learning style and how they felt they had changed throughout the semester. This assignment, albeit difficult for some, was influential in that it encouraged some of the women to change behavior, become more assertive, or realize their personal strengths. One student claimed that the Human Services paper "brought me out of my shell" and that she became more assertive: "I was always one that would sit back if anybody said that I was blamed for something.....I'd take the blame for it. Wouldn't open my mouth. Would not contradict anybody.....Where now I got, I'm human and I can say my piece too. You don't like it, it's too bad. And he [husband] found that's exactly what I do now, even with him."

She elaborated on a writing assignment in the College and Self course: "The action papers were helpful. You read stories and you had to write what we called the action papers. How I felt and explain the story that you read and you got points for it. And then in the end we would have to write a self concept paper about yourself. It had to be realistic and you got six points."

Another student felt that the self-analysis paper forced her to think about "yourself and your surroundings. It was worth it, you got to know yourself better."

A third student talked about how the Human Services paper made her re-think her behavior towards her children: "She made me do a paper.... and in my crooked way of thinking before, I could justify things that were unjustifiable. Like my kids were so overwelmed that, in order not to be the heavy, I would give in to them, not make them obey. Saying that through good nutrition it would outweigh the other. And she [the teacher] pointed out that we can justify this without feeling guilty, but it's not right. And I tried to be more assertive. The kids didn't love me any more for giving in. I didn't come to them and say I'd.....like they'd ask me if they could smoke and I said, 'Sure, as long as you buy your own. And you don't do it in my home.' I ruined their purpose to smoke. They

smoked the one day and that was it. That turned out better than I thought it would."

2) Other writing assignments.

Writing assignments in other classes also influenced these women. One student adopted writing as a college major after a positive experience. One found a role model through her research for paper and another student described her grammar teacher as one of the best instructors he had.

One woman enjoyed her English class immensely and she "discovered" that she loved to write. She liked her instructor; she liked the assignments. She found that the instructor made her "think" and she accepted her ideas. Writing was a "catharsis" for her. She wrote an article about her aunt who took a trip to France and it was printed in the local newspaper. "When my great aunt came over from France I wrote the article that was printed in the Daily News. I interviewed her, I took the picture that was in the paper and I wrote the article. And thoroughly enjoyed it." This student switched majors and graduated with a two-year degree in journalism.

Another student wrote a paper for her English class where she had to describe a person's character. When the instructor gave her a low grade, criticizing the paper as a mere chronological listing of events, she protested and got the grade changed: "We were to write a paper about somebody we admired and I wrote on Jim Thorpe and he just told me that it was a chronological lisitng. And I said, 'Didn't you read it?'

"And he said, 'Yes, I did.'

"And I said, 'Well, can't you understand the way this paper was in chronological order from the time that he was born? And I showed you that he was always pushed, he was the only American Indian who won both the decathlon and the pentathlon, the five events.' I said, 'Look, he was pushed. And yah, he really was from the time he was little. And as for the rest of his training was....no formal training. It was swinging on the branches, running broad jump races that they used to have with all the kids in his community. I wrote that out, you know. And through his hardships and when he was twelve years old he was sent to a school 200 miles away. And he got word that his dad had been injured in a hunting incident. He left for home on foot, 200 miles....and no roads are paved. He just found his way home. Now could your kid at twelve year's old be able to do something like that? This is what I got out of the paper, the strength and character of this man, this young boy and how he developed.' And I had tears in my eyes, you know. He gave me an A-."

When asked to describe a good instructor, one student felt that the writing instruction of her secretarial science

instructor was "really supurb." She elaborated: "And because of her thoroughness, and she wouldn't expect anything that wasn't perfect, she really made you know your grammar. She would tell you why a comma. She said your comma was not necessary or needed and she could show you the rules from the book. And she was able to back up things. And she gave us a Practical English Handbook. And she made us use it along with pointing out and telling different things."

In conclusion, writing assignments which asked the institutional persisters to explore their feelings, goals, and thoughts had a positive influence on them. These assignments gave them an outlet from which to analyze their thoughts and boosted their self-confidence. Such assignments encouraged assertiveness in some and one woman discovered a positive role model in her assigned character paper. For the institutional persisters, courses requiring writing assignments were positive experiences, especially when students were required to give their opinions, research lives of other people, discuss self-awareness, and articulate their goals. The writing process made some of them think; it was a discovery for others. One of the persisters actually made journalism her career.

Leavers

Systems leavers, on the other hand, described some difficulty in writing certain types of papers. Some did have positive experiences, but reports were mixed as to the benefits of writing. Of the nine women interviewed, three discussed their experiences.

1) Self analysis and opinion papers.

One leaver complained about the writing assignment in her Human Services I course: "I hated it [Human Services course]. I withdrew very, very quickly from it, I remember that. There was something weird about the teacher. Oh, this reaction paper and the self-analysis paper. First of all, I don't type. It was a real problem up at that school. I don't type. They wanted it typed or if you didn't know how to type she wanted you to get somebody to type it for you and.....I don't like to do things like that, seriously. I'm not a writer."

Another leaver enjoyed some of the opinion papers in her English II course, however. "I liked him as a professor because he was opening you up to new things. It didn't seem to me like a strict English class, you know. We watched a lot of different type film strips. And it's like, to me, it doesn't seem like something you watch in English class, I guess. And then we saw different paintings like he had from the art galleries, different paintings and sculptures and things. And he had us write down on paper just what we thought of these and just things like that, you know. He kind of let you give your opinion about things, you know."

2) Other writing assignments.

One leaver at first complained about an assigned journal in biology. However, as time progressed, she grew to like the class and the instructor. "And then you had to write a log. You had to keep a log and give it to him [the biology teacher] at the end of the semester. Like a daily diary. What you were learning, what you were getting out of it and how you hoped to benefit from it. And that was your final grade as a matter of fact, that log. He based your whole mark on what you write in that diary." [She later amended that last statement to indicate that tests counted for one third of the grade.]

She expanded on her reactions to the journal. "I thought it was good. A little angry at first. You have to write a diary. You know, you thought just give us an exam. Let us walk out of here. Why go through this nonsense building up a folder twenty, thirty pages long? And one day I even said to him, 'You know, you're not gonna to read them anyway. There's no way you're gonna read thirty kids' diaries here. You're not gonna do it.' And he says, 'Oh, I'm gonna do it. It might take all summer, but I'm gonna do it.'"

She proudly held up her biology journal for inspection: "That's all from the biology class. That's how he was. We even had to do a journal on dreams. The whole paper was on dreams."

However, there were other reactions to writing assignments which were negative. One leaver did not like writing in her English course: "My first English class I didn't really care for too much. We had to write a big term paper type thing. And, you know, it was too structured, I guess. And I did real well in it, but I didn't really like the class."

In order to graduate, another leaver had to simply write up a paper based on the journal that she kept during her internship. She reasoned that she did not have time to finish the paper or enough money to pay for the internship course: "I got my book. It's all filled out except there's a couple reports that I was supposed to write and type up, which I never got to because it started getting busy at the hotel [where she did her internship]. I didn't get it done because I was working seventy hours a week and I didn't have time to stay up all night and write papers and type them up, cause I'm a very bad typist. I haven't typed in years and years. There just wasn't time."

One leaver resented the fact that one instructor did not expect the students to write: "....the class seemed so simple. He made things so simple for the kids. And I think if things were more maybe a little bit harder you would have learned more, you know. It was like kids used to go in there

and say, 'Oh, gee, you don't have to do anything. Just write a couple of words down on a piece of paper to pass this class.' And it was almost the truth, I think."

In conclusion, reactions to writing assignments were mixed in terms of the systems leavers. Some of them complained about the requirement that papers be typed because they were poor typists and could not afford to hire people to type for them. One leaver did not like the self-analysis paper assigned in the Human Services course. One leaver did not complete her internship paper and thus did not graduate.

Two of the leavers found some writing assignments positive when they could express their opinions in an unstructured manner (English II and biology class). The instructors of these courses were also well-liked.

One leaver resented a class where the teacher accepted mono-syllables for written answers to course homework. She felt that this was inappropriate for college level work and it certainly was not challenging for her.

Implications for Instructional and Program Design

Implications can only be generalized to this specific population of exceptional cases of adult returning women in a community college in upstate New York. However, the interviews suggested that writing can be a positive vehicle for self-expression, in persisters particularly. The women who discussed their writing assignments in a positive manner found writing to be an outlet for their opinions, feelings, and goals. Writing helped build self-confidence and self-awareness. Self-analysis papers, opinion papers, reaction papers, and journals in content courses were mentioned by these women as assignments which influenced their decisions during their college tenure because the papers gave them an avenue from which to discuss their thoughts and feelings and cope with stress and solve problems.

Writing as a vehicle of self-expression and an instructional tool to improve thinking has been corroborated in recent research. Greenwood (1988) of Kent State University used a survey to interview adult returning women who were taking English courses. She found that writing was a positive vehicle for self-expression, especially if it was linked to life experiences. Her advice for teaching was: "A recommendation for instruction would be to encourage personal narrative writing assignments early in the term when the re-entry writers are overcoming insecurities. Their experiences, dignified by written expression and valued appropriately by a receptive audience, create an effective scaffold for more challenging assignments" (p. 146).

Along the same vein, writing in courses other than English could encourage "thinking" and "self-expression" for adult returning women as was exemplified by the journal or log in the biology course. Even the discipline of

mathematics could include writing components: "A growing number of mathematics professors are asking their students to keep journals, write papers, and answer essay questions on tests. They are adding reading and writing to arithmetic---not to mention calculus, discrete mathematics, topology, algebra, group theory, complex analysis, combinatorics, and statistics" (Turner, 1989, p. A1). The concept behind this was explained by Paul Connolly, head of the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College: "Students take conceptual ownership by articulating mathematical concepts in their own language. Language is the medium through which we construct knowledge for ourselves and others" (Turner, 1989, p. A14).

Encouraging students to look at themselves and at their goals through writing could also give an indication if the student is having problems in college. Unrealistic goals could mean that a counselor or career advisor needs to intervene. Journals could reveal personal or academic problems and an instructor or counselor could then approach the student to assist. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with college may show up in a student's writing and thus identify a potential "high risk" situation.

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FIGURE 1

THE RESEARCH SAMPLE
[Fall 1982-83 Entering Women Freshmen from a Community College]

FALL 1982	SPRING 1984		FALL 1985		SPRING 1986	
	GRADUATED	NOT GRADUATED	GRADUATED	NOT GRADUATED	GRADUATED	NOT GRADUATED
PREDICTED SUCCESS	IP	SP	IP	SP	IP	SP
		SL (Academic)		SL (Academic)		SL (Academic)
		SL (Voluntary)		SL (Voluntary)		SL (Voluntary)
PREDICTED HIGH RISK	IP	SP	IP	SP	IP	SP
		SL (Academic)		SL (Academic)		SL (Academic)
		SL (Voluntary)		SL (Voluntary)		SL (Voluntary)

Institution Persister (IP): Those that graduated from the community college
System Persister (SP): Those that transferred to another educational institution
System Leaver (SL): Those that left through academic dismissal (A) or voluntary withdrawal (V)

SHADED AREA: students included in the study (exceptional cases)